

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

ENERGY & NATURAL RESOURCES



SENATOR MARIA CANTWELL, *Ranking Member*

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Opening Statement Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) Hearing on 2017-2022 OCS Oil and Gas Leasing Program May 19, 2016

“Thank you, Madam Chairman, for scheduling this hearing to examine the 2017-2022 Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program. And I thank the witnesses for being here today.

“Offshore oil and gas production is an important part of our domestic energy portfolio today. And I acknowledge its role in the regional and local economies where production takes place.

“As we have this discussion today, we have to keep in mind that the potential oil and gas resulting from this leasing program will not contribute to the energy market in a meaningful way for a decade or more. But, during this time, we will see major changes in our energy landscape. So, we need to plan leasing activities in the context of what the future energy economy will look like.

“Last month was the sixth anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill, which was an epic human, economic and ecological disaster. Eleven members of the crew were killed in the explosion, and 17 others were injured.

“Oil spewed into the ocean for nearly three months, a mile below the surface, resulting in the largest offshore oil spill in the history of the United States.

“The 134 million gallons of oil released is about 12 times more than the Exxon Valdez spill.

“What we’re learning about the damages from the final Natural Resource Damage Assessment released just last month, are the following things.

“First, the Deepwater Horizon spill caused the public to lose more than 16 million user days of boating, fishing and beach-going experiences. Total recreational use damages due to the oil spill are estimated at \$693.2 million.

“The deep-sea corals killed by the spill were hundreds of years old.



“Third, in some species of dolphins, the oil spill caused a 35 percent increase in death, a 46 percent increase in failed reproduction and a 37 percent increase in adverse health effects.

“Tens of thousands of sea turtles were killed by the spill, including three of the most critically endangered species of sea turtles in the Gulf.

“And there were many examples of response activities causing more damage than just the oil spill.

“We must incorporate new science about those damages into the decision-making process for oil spill response and into decisions about where we are going to allow oil and gas exploration and production.

“It’s clear that the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster could have been avoided. Multiple Blue Ribbon panels all have concluded that the immediate cause of the blowout can be traced to a series of systematic failures in risk management and a broken safety culture.

“The final version of the offshore drilling safety regulations published last month addressed some of the primary causes of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. It codifies the advances made by industry experts and regulators over the last five years.

“And the Department of the Interior is continuing its work to finalize the Arctic drilling rule.

“But we cannot stop there. Other recommendations by the Oil Spill Commission still need to be implemented by Congress – and action be taken.

“After all, the Coast Guard, NOAA and oil spill experts have testified time and time again that the United States is not prepared to handle a large oil spill.

“And yet, our oil spill response plans and infrastructure have not been updated.

“Nevertheless, we’re moving into deeper and deeper water and going after oil in increasingly challenging environments.

“The Coast Guard has repeatedly stated that we do not have the ability to clean up oil in ice. A spill in an ecologically-sensitive area can have dramatic consequences.



“We also have not completed basic navigation charting nor do we have many forecasting capabilities in the Arctic, despite unpredictable and severe weather conditions that contribute to the possibility of a spill.

“All of this poses a significant risk for exploration activities, which should be considered when making decisions about the final leasing program.

“The question must be asked: can we afford the risk at this stage? We need to ensure that we can drill safely and respond to spills before exploration moves forward in ecologically sensitive areas.

“I urge Interior to consider the greater risk posed while operating in dynamic and challenging offshore environments.

“Lastly, I believe the Atlantic region was rightfully removed from the program due to strong local opposition, conflicts with other ocean uses and market dynamics.

“The Department of the Interior recognized the potential environmental and economic impacts and competing ocean uses. For example, the economic value of commercial fishing in just the mid-Atlantic area is worth more than \$1.5 billion, and ocean-dependent tourism accounts for more than \$10 billion of economic activity.

“For these reasons, it is not surprising that there was significant opposition from the citizens and local officials that responded in those communities.

“Interior should also work to prevent harmful seismic air gun testing in the area, which impacts marine mammals, sea turtles, birds and valuable fish species. With Atlantic drilling off the table, we should not subject marine mammals to negative impacts such as those that have occurred.

“So once again, I thank the Chair for holding this hearing. And I look forward to hearing the testimony of the witnesses.

“Thank you.”

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